# India: Learning a hard lesson

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## While billions are spent on new schools to boost literacy and growth, teaching standards lag behind

The 10-year-old son of an illiterate metal crockery peddler in rural Rajasthan, Surinder Gavariya dreams of being a police officer. But his prospects already seem bleak. Despite four years at the local government primary school in his village Gawariya Ki Dhani, the boy, now a fifth-year student, cannot read basic Hindi.

His teacher, Jagdish Prashad Bairwa, blames Surinder's inability to read on his erratic school attendance; he often misses classes to take the family goats to graze. "They are not very regular," Mr Bairwa says of the 19 children enrolled in the tiny village school. "During the harvest season, or when there is work at home, they don't turn up. Whatever they learn, they forget."

Yet the proceedings inside the bare-walled class are hardly inspiring for first-generation students like Surinder, whose family was unable to provide any pre-school preparation for their son.

Each day, the students — a mix of different ages, grades and skill levels — sit together in a single dim room, spending most of their time working independently on written assignments, which Mr Bairwa then corrects.

Surinder's failure to achieve basic literacy after four years of school is a reflection of a deep crisis in India's primary education system, which threatens to stunt the prospects of tens of millions of young people — as well as India's broader economic ambitions.

Though the country has succeeded in getting nearly all young children enrolled in primary school, studies suggest it is failing to teach many of them even basic skills.

According to the 2014 Annual Status of Education Report — a survey of 650,000 children organised by the non-governmental Pratham Education Foundation, more than half of rural India's fifth-year students cannot read a simple story from a year two textbook fluently. Around 75 per cent of third year students cannot do two-digit subtraction, while nearly 20 per cent of second year students cannot recognise numbers up to 9.

Worryingly, results have declined considerably since the assessments began in 2005. Madhav Chavan, Pratham's CEO, estimates over the past decade, 100m children completed primary school without attaining basic reading and maths skills.

$31bn

India's annual spend on primary education

Pratham is not alone in giving India's education system poor marks. In 2009, India ranked 73 out of 74 participants in the OECD's triennial test of the reading, maths and science skills of global 15-year-olds. New Delhi was so piqued at the results it refused to participate in the subsequent round. Officials argued the test's focus on problem-solving was unfair to their students, who are geared more towards regurgitating facts.

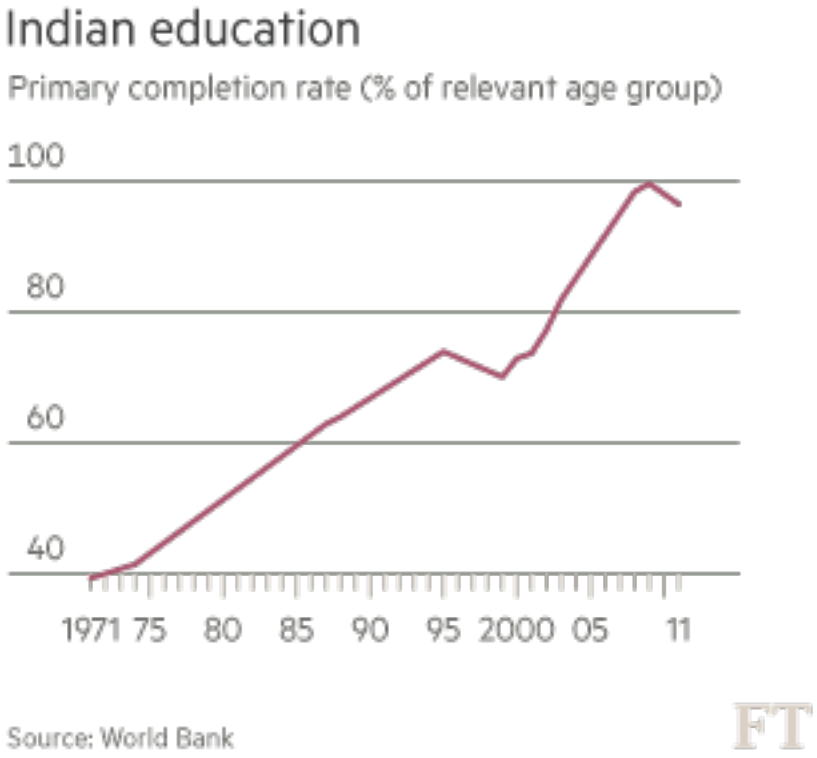
More video

## Economic impact

Indian primary schools' failure to deliver has big implications for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's plan to create millions of new jobs for rural youth aspiring to move out of their villages to non-farming employment. Most newly

created jobs are in services, which require basic literacy and numeracy. Young people who lack these fundamental skills are likely to wind up in employment that barely pays enough to survive.

"It is a binding constraint for society," Manish Sabharwal, chairman of TeamLease, India's largest human resources company, says of the country's education system. "We have these low-skilled, low productivity workers. People are in jobs where they don't make enough to pull out of poverty."




India has made significant progress in ensuring access to primary education since the 1990s, when enrolment was lower than 80 per cent. Back then, many rural families lived too far from the nearest school to comfortably send their children, especially girls. And many rural families did not see much value to schools, which seemed far removed from their farming-centred lives.

But over the past decade, India has pushed hard to promote primary education, spurred by a 2002 constitutional amendment declaring it a "fundamental right" for every child aged 6 to 14. The Education for All campaign set out to ensure that there would be a primary school within easy reach of every home.

From 2005 to 2015, India built about 350,000 new primary schools. Today, more than 95 per cent of villages have a state primary school, and enrolment is all but universal.

“Education was really conceptualised as a basic infrastructure problem — we don’t have enough schools, we don’t have enough teachers,” says Yamini Aiyar, director of the Accountability Initiative, a research project that monitors delivery of public services. “You had to build an environment where it would be easy to get to school.”

70%

Despite advances at primary level secondary school enrolment is below 70%

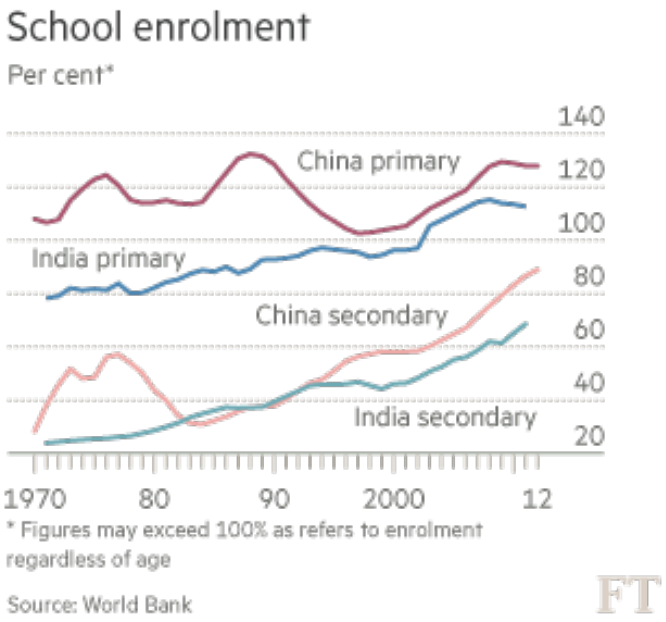
Rising rural aspirations, fuelled by accelerated economic growth and mounting population pressure on farmland, have spurred parental interest in educating their children. Many rural parents now see schooling as a path to coveted government jobs.

“People have bought into the rhetoric that education is important,” says Esther Duflo, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology development economist. “But they see it as a lottery ticket to something wonderful as opposed to a foundation that will help their kids no matter what they do.”

## Rote learning

Yet in their zeal to build schools, and to encourage attendance with incentives such as free lunches, Indian policy makers have paid scant attention to what is taking place inside the new classrooms. There has been little serious national debate over how to teach fundamental skills effectively to millions of first-generation students.

“The government said let’s get children into school, we’ll worry about quality later, and we’ll worry about content of teaching later,” says Vimala Ramachandran, a professor at New Delhi’s National University of Educational Planning and Administration. “They separated the quantitative goals from what is happening inside the school.”




Ms Aiyar echoes that view: "The government focused entirely on getting schools to children and getting children into schools. It assumed the teaching-learning story would take care of itself."

Some argue India's low learning levels are the result of an "overambitious" national curriculum, which assumes all students will master reading in their first year of school, even if they come from "text-scarce" environments, with little or no prior exposure to written material. "By the end of grade 1, they are supposed to be done with reading," says Ms Duflo. "It's a complete fantasy."

Rukmini Banerji, a director of the Aser Centre, which oversees the annual Pratham report, says children need a more gradual start to education, with time spent on developing reading, writing and maths skills. "If our textbooks are too tough, our children will be left behind," she says. "If you create the right foundations, the children will fly."

Instead, after just one year, teachers are expected to disseminate vast quantities of factual information to students, regardless of their comprehension. "Our curriculum became more information-driven rather than cognitive skills driven," says Ms Ramachandran. "Instead of teaching a child how to learn . . . we're overloading our curriculum with information."

**350,000**

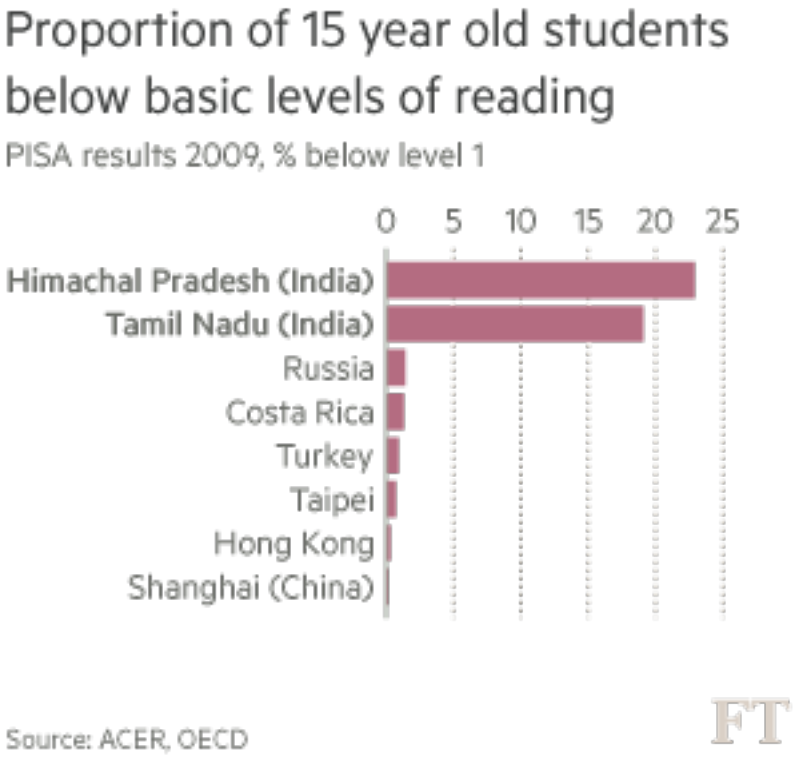
Primary schools built in India between 2005 and 2015

The schools are hardly conducive to learning either. Many rural primary schools have just one or two teachers running mixed classrooms, with students of all ages and competency levels sitting together in a single room. Teachers, many of whom have only rudimentary training, must deliver the prescribed lessons to students of each level, while keeping others busy with independent work. A senior government bureaucrat, who asked not to be identified, argued that India has actually built too many schools, resulting in teachers and students being spread too thinly.

### Absent teachers

At the same time, high teacher absenteeism — surveys indicate 15 to 25 per cent of appointed teachers are absent on any given day — undermines the legally mandated ratio of a teacher for every 30 students. Teachers have job security, but without any real accountability for their students' performance.

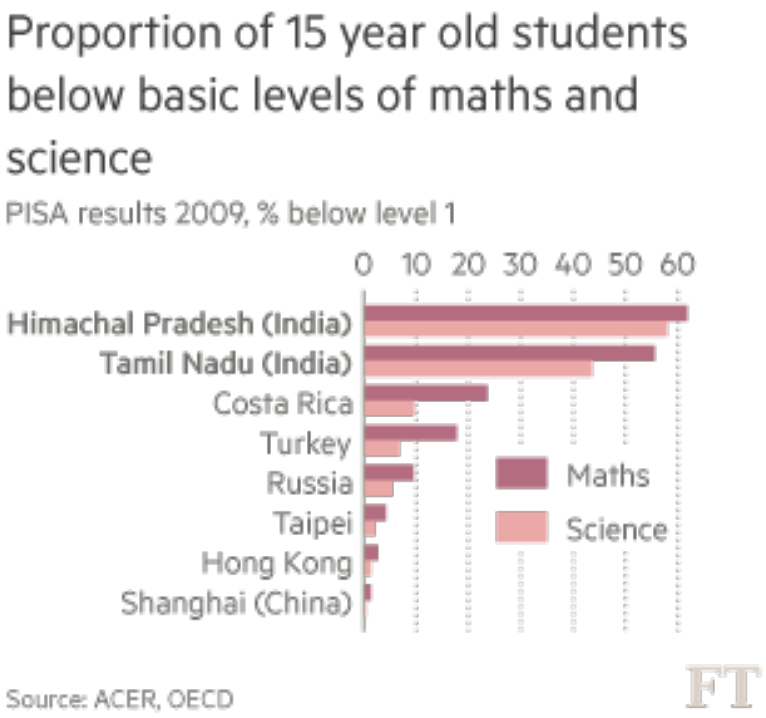
The situation is worsened by state governments routinely using teachers as manpower for large-scale tasks such as elections and surveys. On a recent visit to a Rajasthani village school, CS Chaudhary was single-handedly looking after 70 children aged 6 to 14, something he says is a regular occurrence.



"It's so difficult managing them all together. Their learning levels are different. We are not able to give our students what they want to do, and what they are capable of doing. Half the time goes into just managing," he says.

The Right to Education Act has exacerbated the teaching challenge, requiring students to be taught lessons for their age-appropriate level — rather than for their actual skill, comprehension or education level. In these tough circumstances, most teachers — no matter how dedicated — end up focusing on the students best able to keep pace, while the rest are left to founder.

"Think of a fifth-grade teacher," says the Aser Centre's Ms Banerji. "Look who she has in her class. Five per cent of kids cannot even read letters yet; 13 per cent are just at the letter level; another 15 per cent can only read words, and then she sees [the other] half of the class who can read. She's frustrated. She wants to see progress, so she teaches the kids that can actually get it. But she is not trained what to do with the rest."




The result is growing disillusionment with state education. Families which can afford it are putting their children in bare-bones private schools, while struggling students in government institutions gradually disengage and drop out. Attendance at government primary schools averages about 70 per cent, but it is less than half that in many large states. While secondary-school enrolment is below 70 per cent.

The Modi government has launched an initiative called "India Reads, India Progresses", which offers an idyllic vision of child-centric teaching. The aim is to develop literacy and numeracy in the first two years at school, but it is unclear how the programme will be implemented on a large scale, given the realities of most Indian classrooms.

Many believe learning will only substantially improve once India's education bureaucracy — now obsessively monitoring school toilets, boundary walls and clean drinking water — takes a more active role in academic progress.

"There is no magic bullet," says Ms Aiyar, "but in a world like this, you get accountability for what gets measured. If the government is asking anything it's about is the school built, are the toilets there? Nobody is asking whether the teacher is showing up in school, or once the kids get to school, what's going on?"

**Going private: States go on the offensive against low-cost rivals**

Madan Lal Choudhary, the 28-year-old founder of Rajasthan's Akshita Public School, knows a lot about rural frustration with the state education system.

An hour outside Jaipur, his private institution has 730 students, whose parents pay Rs3,200 ($50) per child per term to attend the spartan school. Aside from a dedicated teacher for students of each grade, Akshita's main selling point appears to be a closed-circuit television system, which allows Mr Choudhary to monitor classrooms.

The parents of Akshita students are among millions enrolling their children in low-cost private schools that are mushrooming across the countryside. Nearly 31 per cent of rural children now attend private school, while in five states — including Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Kerala, the proportion exceeds 50 per cent.

"Parents are voting with their feet," says **Parth Shah, president of the Centre for Civil Society**. It is unclear, however, if these private schools — often started by entrepreneurs with little experience — are any better than those offered by the state. But Mr Shah believes ending the government monopoly on primary education will eventually create schools that are more responsive to student needs.

"Giving parents a choice and compelling government schools to compete with private ones would certainly create a better education ecosystem in the long-run," he argues.

Yet India's educational establishment is going on the offensive against the private system.

In some states, officials are attempting to shut down budget private schools, citing their failure to comply with physical requirements — such as classroom or yard size. In Punjab, state authorities ordered 1,190 private schools to close, while Haryana closed 1,200. But in Haryana, the schools are fighting back, obtaining a stay on the closure notice.